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DIRECTOR: KING HU

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Tony Rayns

The 'discovery' of King Hu's work in the West escalated rapidly last year, thanks to showings at the Cannes, Edinburgh and London festivals and the timely revival of *Four Moods* at one of London's Chinese film clubs; and the NFT's imminent retrospective should serve to fill some of the remaining gaps in our knowledge of his career. It's already clear, though, that none of the interest in *The Fate of Lee Khan* during its London run was misplaced: King Hu is an ambitious and innovative director by the standards of any commercial film industry in the world. Working mainly within a genre whose terms his own early films helped to define, he has consistently conjured themes and incidents from Chinese history and drama into structurally fresh and remarkable films. His choice of historical subjects asserts the continuity of a tradition stretching back to the Ming and Yüan Dynasties and beyond; his aesthetic field of reference extends to classic literature and painting, while drawing extensively on the forms and conventions of the Peking Opera as it developed from the late eighteenth century.

The following feature is in two parts: an interview, which sketches the outline of Hu's career to date and clarifies his somewhat tangential position in the current Hong Kong film industry; and critical notes on the four movies shown in Britain last year, which set out to define some of the salient features of his idiosyncratic, remarkable cinema.

King Hu (Hu Chin-Chuan) was born in Peking in 1931. His father, a geology graduate from Kyoto University in Japan who had participated in the 1911 overthrow of the Ch'ing Dynasty, worked as a mining engineer. At school, like many of his generation, Hu reacted against the 'feudal' family structure still prevalent in China; as a left-wing student, he welcomed the communist take-over of the country in 1949. Wishing to achieve some perspective on the political situation, however, he visited Hong Kong and found himself stuck there when the borders were closed. His early difficulties in securing work were amplified by the fact that he spoke Mandarin (the language of Peking, and China's nearest thing to a national language) rather than the local 'dialect' Cantonese. The following interview, conducted shortly after *A Touch of Zen* won the Commission Supérieure Technique's Grand Prix at Cannes last year, was given in excellent English.

KING HU: My beginnings in the film industry were like this. An advertising company needed someone to paint a huge front-of-house poster for a movie theatre and offered me the job. At the time I was also working as part-time tutor for a young kid whose father was a studio manager; he saw my work on the poster and offered me a job as a set decorator at his studio. I had no idea what a set decorator was, but I needed a job and took it.

While working there I was approached by the director Yen Chun [now retired, the husband of actress Li Li-Hua], asking me to act in his film *The Man who got Slapped*, the story of a man who makes his living as a clown; he needed an 18-year-old to play the man's son. I was 22, and had had no acting experience, but I agreed to try. As it turned out, the film and my performance in it were rather well received, and so I gave up set decorating to become an actor. My second appearance was in a film called *Golden Phoenix*, based on the novel by Shen Tsun-Wen about Chinese country life before the war.

Then when Mr. Yen needed an assistant director, he offered me that job too. He had two assistants; the other was Li Han-Hsiang [now one of the leading directors in Hong Kong, under contract to Shaw Brothers]. We found ourselves working for Yung Hwa Studios, under the management of Li Tsu-Yung, who was very go-ahead but not a very good businessman. The studio eventually went bankrupt—for the last eight months working there, we didn't get paid. I was meanwhile continuing my acting career [in films like Po Wan-Tsang's *Shoeshine Boy* and *The Long Narrow Lane* and Yueh Feng's *The Deformed*] but I needed extra money in order to carry on working at Yung Hwa, and so I started working for local radio stations, producing radio plays and sometimes writing scripts. When the studio was finally sold up, I became a full-time radio producer, and remained one for five or six years, until about 1959.

During that period, Li Han-Hsiang became a contract director for Shaws. He came to me one day and suggested that I sign a contract with Shaws as an actor. I wasn't too interested, but Runme Shaw (Run Run's brother, the second son) proposed a dual contract as actor and scriptwriter, and I agreed to accept that on the understanding that I'd have the chance to direct after writing a number of scripts.

Were you interested in movies before you came to Hong Kong?

No, it was just a way to make a living.

So how did you grow interested in the possibility of directing?

While working as a set decorator or assistant director I was sometimes struck by the thought that the director wasn't doing a very good job, even though I knew nothing about photography or anything. Also, Yen Chun wasn't a well-educated man (he'd started as an actor and worked his way up) and he relied on Li Han-Hsiang and me for a lot of his work. We had a lot of responsibility; both of us were asked to direct odd scenes for him when he felt tired. At the same time, my experience in the studios was a good technical training.

Your first 'official' directing work at Shaws wasn't on your own films either . . .

Right. In 1962, Li asked me to help him with his version of the Huang Mei opera *Liang Shan-Po and Chu Ying-Tai* [usually known in the West as *Eternal Love*]. Run Run Shaw had given him only three months to do it, because the rival M.P. & G.I. Studios (later Cathay) were also producing a version. I turned it down, saying that I'd never seen a Huang Mei opera myself and that I feared all the singing and such would be too slow for my taste, but he prevailed on me to look at the script. It turned out that this consisted of nothing but the lyrics of the songs. I asked how I was expected to work from them alone, and he said that I could do what I liked. Eventually, he did the main sentimental part of the story (which anyway has to have just one director), and I did the faster parts: the lovers-to-be journeying to school and meeting there. Li also did the last part, the graveyard, the deaths and all that.

We were shooting on adjacent stages in the studio, and I was building a countryside set full of cherry blossoms (since it was a love story) when my assistant interrupted, saying that I was making a mistake with the cherries because Mr. Li was shooting his scenes against falling maple leaves. Maple leaves fall in the autumn and cherries bloom in the spring, and so I rushed to his stage and asked what the hell he was doing. He said he was using maple leaves because they suggested the story was going to be tragic. I pointed out that one of us was going to have to change it, and so he redecorated his set. I never saw the finished film.

How did you come to direct your own films?

After I'd been there a year or two, Shaw Brothers took over from the old Shaw & Sons organisation, and I was assigned to direct *Sons and Daughters of the Good Earth*, a large-scale movie about Chinese guerrilla activities against the Japanese in the Second World War. I wasn't very lucky, because the production went over budget. None the less, the previews went well, but at about that time Singapore and Malaysia passed a new law forbidding any depiction of racial conflict and chose to apply it to the film. It was cut by about an hour, and the resulting film was meaningless. It was especially serious, because Singapore and Malaysia were then the biggest market areas in South East Asia. I'd been planning a second film on the subject (*Ting Yi-Shan*, the name of a Chinese guerrilla leader) to re-use the costumes and props in order to compensate for overspending on *Sons and Daughters*, but the situation forced us to abandon it.

My second picture, in 1965, was *Come Drink With Me*, an action film that was a great success. I brought in Han Ying-Chieh [since an actor and fight arranger in innumerable Hong Kong films] to 'choreograph' the action scenes, because of his background in Peking Opera. It was the first time that Hong Kong action movies

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Left: the forest scene in 'A Touch of Zen'. Chiao Hung, Hsu Feng, Pai Ying

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Yueh Hua and Cheng Pei-Pei in 'Come Drink with Me'

had made use of the Peking Opera tradition. After that, I terminated my contract with Shaws.

What kind of contract did you have?

A little different from the usual one, because I had been contracted primarily as an actor. A director's contract might say that for a certain sum annually he has to direct four movies, and that if he's unable to finish four then he owes the company money back. It might also give the company first option of renewal, and if the director owes the company money, he may be unable to move elsewhere. In my case, I didn't owe them money, but I did owe them two more pictures as an actor. I said I'd do them if they insisted, but I retained the right to choose the scripts. Shaws wanted to keep me, but I wanted a change.

In 1965 I signed with Sha Jung-Feng's Union Film Company, and immediately started to make another historical action film from my own script; that was *Dragon Gate Inn*, and it broke commercial records all over South East Asia, outgrossing even *The Sound of Music*. At Union, I started from scratch. I built the studio for them, bought technical equipment for them, advertised for actors and trained the successful applicants (who included people like Pai Ying, Shangkuan Ling-Feng and Tien Peng), and instructed many of the studio personnel. I worked as both director and production manager for them.

It was the success of *Dragon Gate Inn* that enabled you to make *A Touch of Zen*?

Yes. I'd been attracted to a 4-page story called *Sha Nü* in a collection of ghost and fantasy stories by the Ming Dynasty scholar P'u Sung-Ling [translated as *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* by Herbert Giles, who renders *Sha Nü* as *The Magnanimous Girl*] and wanted to use it as the basis for a film. The story is very simple and lacks any historical background, which made it difficult to expand into a movie script. A series of conversations with friends during the writing led me to the idea of using Zen Buddhism as a theme in my script—I'm not a Buddhist myself, but I was fascinated by the challenge of showing something that cannot be explained by the logical processes of Western philosophy. It's like trying to explain to someone what 'sweet' is and finding it hard, but then giving them a lump of sugar to taste. Or like trying to describe swimming to someone, and then letting them jump in the water . . .

Once the script was written, I set about building the main set for the film: the ruined town, which was an open set. It took eight or nine months to construct. After we'd built it, we had to make it look very old, and experimented with a number of ideas to 'age' it convincingly. And then we had to plant grass (a kind of white fern that looks very ghostly) to make it look overgrown, and several big, old trees were transplanted into the set from other places. Although it cost a lot, after I left the company they made a lot of money from it, by renting it out for other movies: around two hundred pictures have been shot there. I built it to last.

It also took a lot of time to find the right locations for other scenes. They were way off the beaten track, and in some cases we had to climb to get to them. In particular, the bamboo forest (where Han Ying-Chieh first confronts the fugitives) was very awkward, because it's in a valley and it only catches the sun for three or four hours a day. It took 25 days to shoot that one 10-minute sequence.

In the middle of shooting, Mr. Sha came to me and said that I was spending too much money. He suggested that I make the film for release in two parts. I agreed to try, although half the film was already shot. Then, when we'd nearly finished, he came along again and said he'd changed his mind: it would be better as a single film. Furious, I pointed out that the film wasn't a piece of elastic that you could stretch out or snap tighter—I'd made it as he requested, and that was all there was to say. Given all these problems, it took about two years to complete the film.

After I'd finished editing, in 1968, I went off to a conference in the United States. While I was away, *A Touch of Zen* was cut down to a single 2-hour film for release. It was a flop, and I never saw it.

After that, you left Union?

Yes, partly because of the way they had treated *A Touch of Zen*, but also because I discovered they had used my name to advertise two more of their pictures in Korea. These were films that I'd never even heard of, despite being their production manager. I first heard about them from a Korean friend, who wrote to say that he was surprised I was doing such poor work. I later discovered that they had sold the pictures to Korea for a higher price on the strength of my *Dragon Gate Inn* reputation. So I left to organise my own little company, for which I've now made *The Fate of Lee Khan* and *The Valiant Ones*.

You've also collaborated on an independent film with Li Han-Hsiang?

That was during my period at Union, and it was strictly a voluntary thing. Li had left Shaw Brothers to found his own Kou Lien Company, but it had gone broke and he was threatened with arrest if he didn't clear his bank overdraft by a certain date. Li Hsing, Pai Ching-Jui and I got together and agreed to do something to help Li Han-Hsiang. We had no money, but we were worth something as directors, and so we decided to contribute an episode each to a 'quartet' picture, *Four Moods*, with Li Han-Hsiang himself directing the fourth episode. My episode was *Anger*; I based the script on a Peking opera. All four episodes were costume pieces. We did it just to pay the bank. It worked, but Li Han-Hsiang had to rejoin Shaw Brothers afterwards.

Is there any reason why you prefer period subjects?

It's just that I started out doing them, and found them interesting. Also, I'd done research into the history of Chinese literature.

Why do you concentrate on the Ming Dynasty in particular?

It's a particularly controversial period, both in China and among overseas Sinologists; there was a much discussed book by Wu Han about Ming politics. It was on the one hand the period when Western influences first reached China; on the other, it was one of the most corrupt periods in Chinese politics. Most of the Ming emperors were bad: some were drug addicts, some were very young indeed when they came to the throne. Power was effectively in the hands of the Court Eunuchs, who created their own secret service, the '*tung ch'ang*' or 'Eastern Group'. Without exaggeration, you could say that the power of the *tung ch'ang* exceeded that of the German Gestapo. They could arrest and execute virtually anyone, including ministers of the Court, without accountability or, indeed, any legal process. Both *Dragon Gate Inn* and *A Touch of Zen* deal specifically with the operations of the *tung ch'ang*. At the time I made those films, the James Bond movies were very popular, and I thought it very wrong to make a hero of a secret service man. My films were a kind of comment on this.

How closely are your fictions based on historical fact?

Very closely. *The Fate of Lee Khan*, for instance, drew on all the available information about Lee Khan himself . . . he *was* a strange man, he *did* have this close relationship with his sister, he *was* assassinated in a remote place while on a tour of inspection.

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I did invent the names of the assassins; in history, nobody knows who assassinated him. In *A Touch of Zen*, the girl's father, Yang Lien, was an actual historical character, killed by the *tung ch'ang*.

You're also careful about period detail?

Yes. For instance, the robes of Lee Khan and his sister are genuine antiques, and I had to take special precautions during the shooting to protect them, they were so fragile. You also have to be careful about colour, because there used to be regulations about it. The ordinary people were not allowed to wear red or yellow, for example. Also, some colours did not exist as dyes at certain periods. As for costume design in general, we were influenced by Peking Opera, and by those local operas and plays, and I supplemented such influences with my own research into old paintings and other records. Things like details of an official's dress are easy to discover, because they're well documented; it's harder to find out about the common people.

Your films blend this historical accuracy with distinct elements of fantasy, especially in the action scenes . . .

I've always taken the action part of my films as dancing rather than fighting. Because I'm very interested in the Peking Opera, and particularly its movement and action effects, although I think it's difficult to express them adequately on stage . . . the physical limitations are too great. A lot of people in Hong Kong have misunderstood me, and have remarked that my action scenes are sometimes 'authentic', sometimes not. In point of fact, they're always keyed to the notion of dance. In *A Touch of Zen* I used Peking Opera music with the action scenes, to emphasise the rhythm and tempo, instead of making them more 'authentic' or realistic. Everything is sketched in advance.

Does that have a specific Zen Buddhist connotation in the film?

Not a specific one: that's why I called it 'a *touch* of Zen'. The same goes for the sun and moon imagery, and for Chiao Hung's role as the monk Hui-Yuan: the scenes with him can sustain both a 'rational' and a Buddhist interpretation. The moment when he bleeds gold, for example, could be taken as the subjective vision of Han Ying-Chieh, deranged in his dying moments; or, in Buddhist terms, it's *tien hua*, a *hint* that Hui-Yuan is a real Buddha.

Why do you use the same actors so often?

I suppose it's because it's easier to communicate—if I say I want this or that, they'll understand. Hsu Feng and Pai Ying were among the actors I trained at Union . . . Angela Mao [Mao Ying] came to me then too, but she was too young, and so I didn't use her until *The Fate of Lee Khan* . . . Hu Chin was in my episode of *Four Moods* . . . Tien Feng, who played Lee Khan, used to be an assistant director.

Do you have your cast in mind when you write a script?

The leads, maybe, but not all of them. If I write an outline, I also find that I need to visit the locales I'm writing about. I find it impossible to establish atmosphere in a script, I need to see the place. I always prefer to work on location; the perspectives are always greater.

What are your current projects?

I'm writing two stories, *The Great Magician* and *Rain in the Mountains*. The first is set in an extremely remote mountain region of China, and deals with a clash between a herbal doctor who arrives there, and the witch who controls the people through superstition and who is in league with the local authorities. The doctor is eventually driven to emulate the witch's tactics to get through to the people, and the film questions whether he's right to do so, however honourable his motives.

The second is about Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism at the time that Western influences first impinged on China. The missionaries arrived and brought astronomy, mechanical sciences and weaponry. The main thing is that I'll do it very objectively, because I don't claim to know what the exact consequences of Western influence were. The film describes the very beginning. It's a fiction: it's about a crown prince who runs away when the Manchurians take over, and about the various influences exerted on him in attempts to decide his best course of future action.

You're also an author.

I'm writing a biography of Lao She, the novelist who died in 1969. He was a Manchurian, born in 1899; he was the only writer who used Peking dialect to write his books. I suppose he's best known in the West for *The Rickshaw Man*, but his work has been translated into at least twelve languages.

Do your film interests relate to your interest in Chinese history and literature?

I think that they are largely something separate.

Hsu Feng and Pai Ying in 'The Valiant Ones'

NOTES ON FOUR FILMS

King Hu's progress through the industry that gave him his first serious job—from the largest of the major studios, through the youngest of minor studios and on to complete independence—is all but a process of disengagement. The corollary of this is the extraordinary consistency of his work, which makes it a cinch for auteurist analysis; rarely has a 'commercial' director remained so impervious to the 'house styles' of the studios where he worked, or so faithful to his own preferred themes, motifs and style. Hindsight reveals Hu's influence at work in some of the other Chinese martial arts movies that have reached Britain (notably Chang Cheh's *Golden Swallow* and Wu Ma's *Deaf and Mute Heroine*, both of interest in themselves), but such influence seems to have been both superficial and rather short-lived, especially since the craze for 'kung fu' movies died out during 1973. Along with Chang Cheh, whose recent movies have centred on genuinely expert martial artistry *per se*, Hu is one of the few Chinese directors still working in the 'period action' genre, and the chief reason that he's able to do so is that his films deviate so extensively from the genre's norms; his introduction of codes and conventions from the Peking Opera was no more than the start of what amounts to a reinvention of the genre in his own terms.

PLOT

Since Hu has no truck with the kind of rivalry and revenge mechanisms that power most martial arts movies, it's not surprising that his approach to questions of dramatic construction owes nothing to the genre's usual stark functionalism. In fact, all the four films seen here are noticeably unorthodox in their plotting. The most extreme example is *A Touch of Zen*, an epic narrative that proceeds through a series of redefinitions of its own terms: apparently beginning as a ghost story, then revealing its 'ghosts' as tactical tricks in an all-too-human battle campaign, and then elevating its human conflicts to a very different supernatural (metaphysical?) level. And the redefinitions are accompanied by constant enlargements in the narrative perspective; retrospectively, the minutely detailed exposition comes to be seen as a mere hiatus in

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the quest that gives the film its overall design. Conventionally linear plotting is kept to a minimum in the opening scenes of *The Fate of Lee Khan* (where the resulting sense of confusion sets the context for the political thrust of the later action), and dispensed with entirely for much of *The Valiant Ones* (where most of the narrative developments occur *between* scenes rather than during them).

Underpinning these formal inventions is Hu's exceptional capacity for narrative compression, which finds exemplary definition in *Anger*, his contribution to *Four Moods*. Apart from a brief prologue which situates the action historically (and thus politically), the film observes a strict unity of time and place. Like a prototype for *Lee Khan*, it's set in an inn, and concerns the cross-purposes of its various inhabitants during one night and the following morning. The proprietress (Hu Chin) is a receiver of stolen goods, and runs the place as a front for various other criminal activities; her overnight guests are political prisoner Wang Chiao-Hsun, the guards escorting him to an island jail, and the mysterious Jen Tang-Hui, who poses as a businessman but is actually there to free Wang. No effort is wasted on rationalisations or explications; Hu simply meshes together his characters—each with some hidden motive—with the same good-humoured dexterity that informs *Lee Khan*, and then orchestrates the tensions that inevitably spring up between them in outbursts of florid martial action. The *mise en scène* meanwhile tends towards Sternberg-like abstraction, with attention lavished on light, shade, colour and texture. It's the very mixture of concrete and 'abstract' elements that makes the result so pregnant: not just the play between political action and fantastic, balletic fights, but the way that each precise detail (the precision if anything heightened by the lack of back-up explanation) is put to both material *and* figurative use.

This kind of expressionism is, of course, a comfortable idiom for any generic action movie that looks to carry out most of its signifying at a purely visual level. Hu takes it much further than most directors, however, partly because he's tapping exceptionally rich graphic and dramatic traditions in his composition and design, but also because his non-linear way with narrative throws unusual weight on to the internal dynamics of individual scenes and shots.

This is nowhere truer than in *The Valiant Ones*, where each scene is a virtual set piece. The film chronicles the efforts of Chinese official Yu Ta-Yu (Chiao Hung) to eradicate one of the many Sino-Japanese pirate bands ravaging the Chinese coastline during the Ming Dynasty; the fact that the pirates have bribed most local officers forces him to turn to civilian friends for help. His unusual tactics—extending to elaborate ambushes, bluffs and counter-bluffs and the use of explosives—eventually meet with success, albeit at great cost to his friends; but his subsequent failure to pay a bribe himself earns him demotion as a reward. As in *Lee Khan*, the fictional story is a cypher for the historical facts, on which the film quietly insists in its opening and closing narrations. (The introduction further juxtaposes Ming portraits of the emperor Chia Ching and the chief pirates with brief shots of the actors who will impersonate them, thus stressing the film's basis in diligent research.)

But the narrative is actually held in suspension for most of the film, its occasional shifts in direction being signalled by nothing more than glimpses of Yu Ta-Yu explaining his latest strategies to his corrupt or weak court superiors. For the rest, each individual scene centres on action in the field and usually depicts a physical or psychological skirmish of some sort; each is inconclusive in narrative terms, but at the same time more or less self-contained formally. In consequence, the film has two parallel diegeses, which are neither autonomous nor completely dependent on each other. One is the 'suspended' historical narrative, which is explicitly left 'unfinished' or open-ended: Yu Ta-Yu is first seen *in medias res* (as if the film's action began at an arbitrary point), and the final shots of him mourning his dead colleagues are accompanied by a narration remarking the smallness of his gain and pointing out that pirates continued their plunder of China for more than a century. The other is the very fabric of the film's action: the pointed variations on the theme of military strategy, the split-second choreography of its physical manoeuvres, the extraordinary editing with its rhetoric of repetitions and alterations, and the clear-eyed celebration of solidarity between honest officials and Chinese civilians in the fight for social reform.

SYNTAX

Although he works much more slowly and painstakingly than his contemporaries in the Hong Kong film industry, Hu shares with many of them a preference for editing his films in camera, in so far as he uses a new camera set-up for almost every shot. (The Western technique of basing a scene on a master take and then cutting in to close-ups, reverse-field shots and so on is used very rarely indeed.) The immediate effect of this is to eliminate (or at least counter) the staidness of 'classic' narrative exposition as it is still extensively practised in Hollywood, but to substitute for it an editing rhetoric of close-ups, zooms and pans that can rapidly become equally formulary. Except when he consciously exploits it, as throughout *The Valiant Ones*, Hu keeps this tendency to rhetoric very much in check. The syntax of his films is accordingly volatile and unpredictable (in *A Touch of Zen* it even admits multi-screen in one sequence, and switches to colour negative in another), although never less than purposive and carefully reasoned.

'A Touch of Zen': Hsu Feng, Pai Ying

The actual construction of individual shots and sequences in his films naturally depends on context and intention, but Hu's general lack of interest in linearity finds a correlative in one consistent tactical trait: where the circumstances of shooting deny him much 'natural' depth of field (as in most studio interior work), he works to create it by means of tracking shots and other deliberate shifts in perspective. Conversely, he films location exteriors almost exclusively in static shots and pans, and is much readier to fragment continuous motion through editing in such scenes. This trait was already evident in Hu's contribution to Li Han-Hsiang's *Eternal Love* in 1962. Shot entirely in the studio (like the rest of the film), his scenes with the future lovers Shan-Po and Ying-Tai settling into school routine are distinguished by long, mobile takes that push the limitations of the sets to the extreme. There, the visual syntax refreshes and even partially transcends the opera conventions to which the film is otherwise subservient.

A Touch of Zen accomplishes its complex trajectory—from the mundane life of the impoverished painter-scholar Ku Sheng-Chai to the sublime transfiguration of the Buddhist monk Hui-Yuan—as much through variation and experiment in its syntax as through the plot itself. The opening scenes, with Ku (Shih Chun) becoming embroiled in what he imagines to be a ghostly visitation but is in fact a political vendetta, generate unease by using structures that are in some way unresolved: scenes that break off before they're 'complete', discontinuities of action, tracking shots that lead 'nowhere', clashes of idiom (such as naturalism versus expressionism) that achieve no 'synthesis'. When the plot comes to admit a measure of clarification, it's appropriate that it should do so in the form of two flashbacks that are structurally 'complete' in themselves. But at the same time subtle inflections in the syntax (a quickening tempo in the editing, a newly lyric tone in the montages, a sudden expansiveness in the pans) are broadening the action's perspectives, clearing the way for the revelation that the drama is still not entirely what it appears to be. The climactic scenes are dazzling set pieces, each in turn more densely constructed, each resolving an earlier 'gap' or question, and each—through the steady escalation of 'fantastic' elements—leading the drama further into the limitless metaphysical realms of its ending.

The stylistic rhetoric that dominates *The Valiant Ones* springs from the film's genre elements, which are much stronger than in the other films: the frequency of fights, the emphasis on martial prowess, the 'tournament' scene in which two of the stars are challenged to display their martial skills. Disdaining the idea of using such elements as an end in themselves, Hu rather exploits their conventionality (and popularity, no doubt) by using them as the basis for daring experiments on a syntactic level. All the

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major fight scenes are constructed from countless very short shots, edited with astonishing precision to percussive scores (from Peking Opera) while retaining the full momentum of the physical action. The artifice is pushed further by 'clusters' of near-identical shots: a blow or a movement is sometimes shown several times in ultra-rapid succession. The effect of this rhetoric in the editing is not just to banish notions of 'realism' but also to raise sections of the action to a virtually abstract plane of expression.

ACTION

Along with some of the costume design, it's the action sequences in Hu's films that bear the strongest imprint of a Peking Opera influence. Pitched at a level of basic artifice that permits the actors to all but fly, his fights are unique in the genre for their mixture of delirious stylisation and formal choreography; as Hu explains in the interview here, they are arranged by Han Ying-Chieh (himself a protagonist in several of the most spectacular examples, including the climactic bout of *A Touch of Zen*), who was originally trained in Peking Opera stagecraft and acrobatics. Beyond their considerable aesthetic qualities, though, the fight scenes are remarkable for the semantic weight they carry in relation to the surrounding action.

It is partly just a question of idiom. In *Anger*, for instance, the inn's proprietress is disturbed at her accounts by the late arrival of a visitor seeking lodging and somersaults down from the balcony to open the door to him; the 'magical' gesture is assimilated into the naturalistic flow of the action, expressing the woman's impatience and speeding the exposition on its way. But Hu takes the integration process further still. In *The Fate of Lee Khan* and *A Touch of Zen*, the fights become cyphers for other (political, spiritual) kinds of combat, picking up thematic and narrative threads and *developing* them. And in *The Valiant Ones*, in so far as this is a film about strategy, they themselves constitute the theme.

The stalemate at Spring Inn in *Lee Khan* is underpinned by the metaphor of a chequer-board: Lee Khan divides the inn with strict lines of demarcation and prohibited areas, and uses them to regulate the passage of characters to and fro. *The Valiant Ones* extends the metaphor to make the link with the theme of strategy more explicit: the Chinese patriots play chequers as they await an expected pirate attack and then, as their look-outs report the approach of their attackers, they turn the chequer-board into a map of battle, using individual chequers to keep a number tally and moves to signal instructions wordlessly to the others. In both cases, the metaphor rests on the (political) concept of teamwork. None of Hu's films evidences much interest in individual heroism: both Lee Khan and the Japanese pirate Hakatatsu are ultimately defeated by groups of patriots, individuals collaborating towards a desired political end.

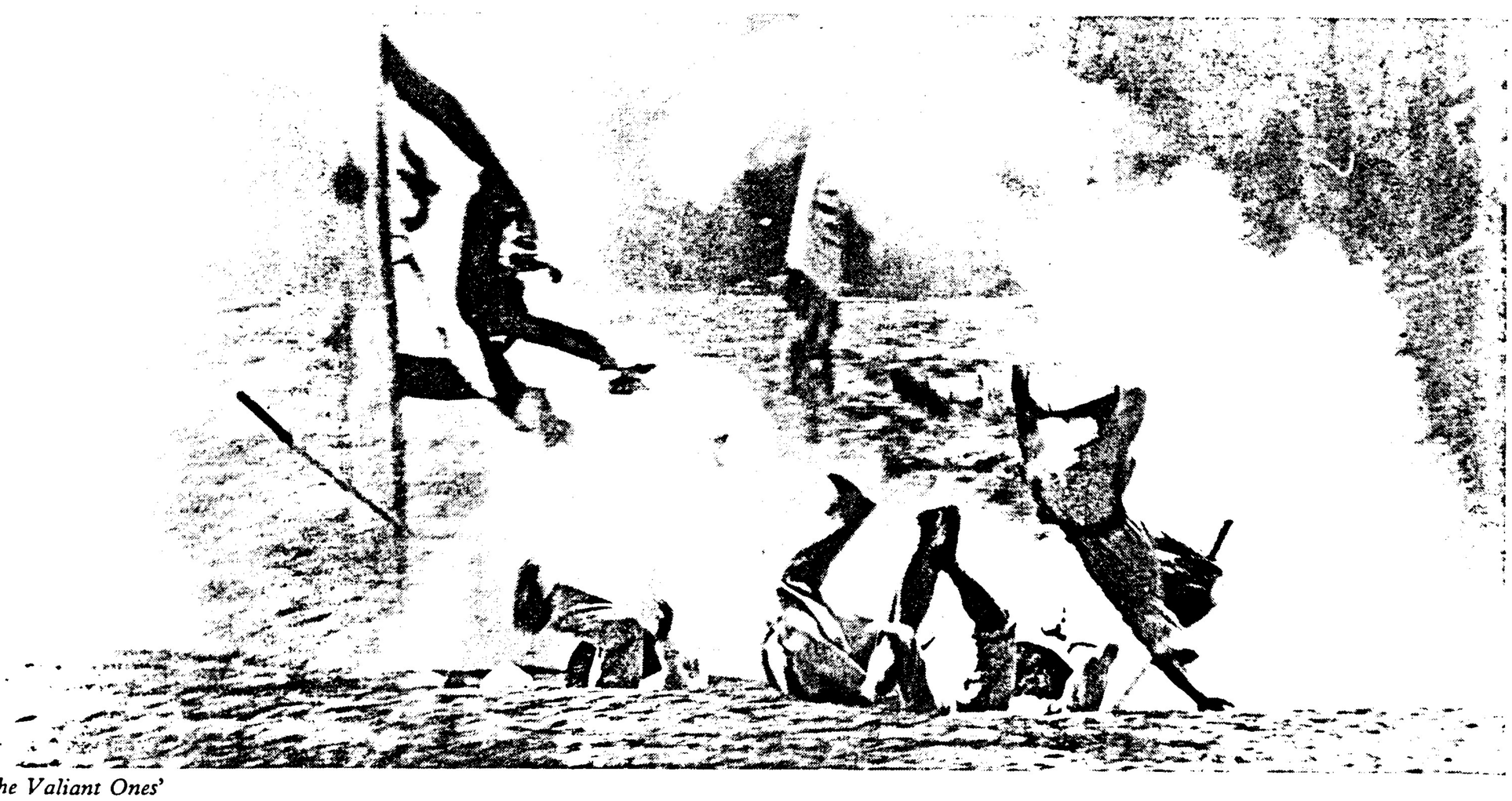
In *A Touch of Zen*, the political fugitive Yang Hui-Chen (Hsu Feng) and her loyal generals (Pai Ying and Hsueh Han) meet the first full-scale attack from the *tung ch'ang* not only with swords, but with a battery of 'special effects' designed to make their headquarters appear haunted. After the battle, Ku, creator of all the trip-wires, dummies and booby traps, roars with laughter as he inspects his handiwork in the light of day. Here, too, a metaphor is at work: the film exposes the mechanics of one kind of strategy in order to shift its own ground to the depiction of another kind.

IMAGERY

Hu's expressionism, historical naturalism and poetically charged fights all rest for their effect on the strength of his imagery. Given that the quality of anamorphic lenses available in Hong Kong effectively rules out deep focus composition, the values that Hu draws from his imagery through his control of colour and composition are the more remarkable. Examples are legion, from the use of 'matching' colours to intimate solidarity in *Lee Khan* to the comic deployment of the inn's fixtures and fittings in combat in *Anger*.

A Touch of Zen, whose scale of conception exceeds the other films in almost every respect, achieves its 'transcendental' climax mainly through forceful re-emphasis of its basic imagery. Hsu (Han Ying-Chieh), leader of the *tung ch'ang*, finally 'corners' his prey in a bamboo forest and is on the point of killing them when the monk Hui-Yuan (Chiao Hung) appears and intervenes. Hui-Yuan, in saffron robes, has already been associated with the sun in earlier appearances; he now appears with the sun directly behind him, so that his glide forward into the arena of combat seems almost propelled by solar energy. During the magisterial clash of giants that follows, the split-second cutting redoubles the force of the image by making Hui-Yuan appear himself a source of light. This in turn prepares for the monk's transfiguration in the final scene: treacherously stabbed by Hsu, he bleeds gold and turns to the sun, as if regaining energy from it. . .

Whether the scene is read literally or figuratively ultimately makes no difference to its meaning: Hui-Yuan's traditional role, and his intervention on the side of the rebels against Ming court corruption, identify him as a representative of China's past, and make of his clash with Hsu in effect an allegory of China's struggle for national identity in a period of particular turmoil. The imagery blends touches of politics, history and aesthetics as well as 'zen', and in the blending lies Hu's mastery. ■



'*The Valiant Ones*'

I am indebted to T. H. Cheah for help in the preparation of this article.—T. R.

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